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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to explore how five-year-old children approach becoming literate. Interviews consisting of eight core questions were conducted with each of 20 kindergarten children. The questions dealt with children's concepts about reading and writing, and about the purposes children establish for writing. Accompanying each set of questions were four pictures depicting people in various reading and writing situations. Following the interviews, the children were asked to complete a writing sample on a topic of their choice. The writing samples and interview data seemed to indicate that children may possess a certain tacit awareness of how written language operates. Their writing samples exhibited a linguistic awareness beyond their abilities to discuss it in any abstract sense or through metalinguistic explanations. The content of the writing samples and interview responses indicated that reasons for writing are far more definite than reasons for reading. In addition, the children identified pictures to be of great significance when reading books. This suggests that beginning reading materials that contain illustrations accompanied by predictable text will make sense to the young reader and that such texts used with an early writing program in which children can experiment with print in a meaningful context could provide children with ample opportunities to learn about language in print. (FL)

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Children's Concepts of Reading and Writing

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In the mind of the young child, the purpose of written language as well as the mechanics involved in becoming literate are confusing and abstract (Downing, 1970; Reid, 1966). This confusion is frequently compounded by teaching methodologies that ignore the knowledge about language children already possess and use effectively (Chomsky, 1971; Halliday, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978). Carol Chomsky (in press) posits that frequently when children are taught to read they are taught first to pronounce the sequence of letters, and then to deduce the meaning. Such methodology disregards what children already know and understand about language. Consequently the child may acquire a distorted perception of the function of literacy and there may arise a belief that reading is the decoding of one set of meaningless visual symbols into

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another set of meaningless auditory symbols (Downing, 1976). While reading may indeed be decoding and encoding, it is more importantly a meaningful activity with a communicative intent which requires of children active participation rather than passive reception.

Studies conducted by Reid (1966) and Downing (1970) indicated that children who are just beginning school have vague notions about purposes for reading. They are unsure about the role of print in reading and generally lack the metalinguistic terminology to adequately describe what they know and understand. Reid found that confusion initially existed concerning the nature of activities involved in reading, the purpose of reading, and the relationship between reading and writing. Through formal reading instruction and exposure to print, children grope toward a resolution of these uncertainties. Downing studied the problem further. He found that children's ability to understand the communicative purpose of written language, the symbolic nature of writing, the decoding process, and their command of technical vocabulary proceed in a developmental fashion.

Given that children have this confusion, it has been suggested by several researchers (Chomsky, 1971; Paul, 1976) that children can come to an understanding of the function of literacy by writing before reading. Chomsky (in press) argues that from a developmental point of view children are ready to write before they read. She maintains that

reading first is a backward step that denies the child the opportunity to be actively engaged in the process. The child, not the teacher, should be directing activities, making choices, picking the words and writing.

The purpose of this study was to further explore how five year olds approach becoming literate. Through questions concerning their thoughts on literacy and writing samples illustrating their knowledge of print, the role of writing in facilitating the child's understanding of written language was examined.

Method

Subjects and Procedures

Twenty children were selected from a kindergarten class in Charlottesville, Virginia. They ranged in age from 5 years, 5 months to 6 years, 3 months. The school draws its population from an area inhabited by families representing a range of educational backgrounds and socio-economic levels.

An interview consisting of eight core questions was conducted with each participant. Part I explored the children's concepts about reading. A number of these questions were patterned after those used by Reid (1966). Part II was comprised of questions written to explore the children's concepts about writing and purposes children establish for writing. Accompanying each set of questions were four pictures depicting people in various reading and writing situations. These were used to help direct the

attention of the children to the immediate task and to give them a concrete point of reference in their responses.

The interviews were conducted informally within the classroom setting. The core questions were put to the children in standardized form. Additional questions were added at the discretion of the interviewer to elicit more information. Following their interviews, the participants were asked to complete a writing sample on a topic of their choice. The combination of open-ended questions and writing samples provided data to assess what the children could do as well as say. Thus it was possible to get information for a more comprehensive picture of how children approach both reading and writing.

Results

Nature and Purpose of Reading

The children who participated in this study indicated that both the nature and purpose of reading varied according to the circumstances. Their interview responses indicated that they felt some ambiguity about the role print plays in telling a story from a book. While the children acknowledged the necessity of word recognition in some situations, such as when reading labels or signs, they were quick to say that it was not important when reading books.

Fourteen children felt that looking at pictures was an integral part of the reading process, and that this activity constituted one way in which a book could be read. From their responses it seems that they believed reading a story

could be accomplished through viewing the pictures: "Look at the pictures and then tell the story about them."

Purposes for reading books were vague. The most frequently mentioned reason, with 12 responses, was so that one could learn to read. It is as though practice makes purpose. Only one child responded that learning new information might result from reading.

Unlike when reading books, identification of purposes in practical situations were explicit and appropriate. In most cases, the purposes were similar to those mature readers would set in identical circumstances. Typical responses included to learn what's in the jar (label), to learn where you are going (sign), and to get information about the world (newspaper).

The participants of this study had for the most part the beginnings of a metalinguistic vocabulary. There was virtually no confusion between letters and numbers, but some between letters and words. Terms such as "sound out" were used appropriately, although an understanding of how this is accomplished was frequently lacking. It appeared from their interview responses that the children had a rudimentary awareness of the decoding process but had not yet truly conceptualized it. While terms such as "beginning sound" were not exactly empty verbalisms to them, they were not yet functionally very meaningful.

Nature and Purpose of Writing

The children's responses concerning both the nature and

purpose of writing were specific. They seemed to stem from an understanding of the usefulness of writing as a means of communication, much like the purposes served by oral language. Even the fledgling writer had specific intentions in mind when writing. The functions written language served for these youngsters included a letter or a story that conveys deep feelings or one's fantasy. Writing also served such practical purposes as informing others of personal plans through a note or giving directions.

Seven of the children felt that writing was a good thing to know how to do because this helped one to learn to read. Perhaps Amy expressed the relationship between reading and writing best. "(Writing) is real special so you learn how to read. Writing helps you to know what it (word) looks like, then you can read it. Practice the word over and over--you remember it and then you can read."

Writing Samples

All of the children who participated in this study were able to write their names. Beyond that, the children's writing abilities varied from producing only letters to writing complete sentences. Of the participants in the present study, 15 demonstrated a use of letter-sound relationships which indicate a rather sophisticated linguistic knowledge considering they have not had benefit of formal reading instruction. Twelve youngsters attempted to use invented spellings to convey their story or message. In order to complete their samples, the children were forced

to attend systematically to print conventions. As they wrote, they sought out words in the room against which to check spelling and letter formation.

The majority of children chose to tell a story through their writing samples. They did so using a combination of print and picture to produce a narrative that demonstrated a knowledge of story form, a sense of theme, and logical sequence of events. As the youngsters wrote, friends would "read" over their shoulders. Completed stories were taken to the teacher or aide to be read and shared.

In summary the writing samples and interview data seemed to indicate that children may possess a certain tacit awareness of how written language operates. Their writing samples exhibited a linguistic awareness beyond their abilities to discuss it in any abstract sense or through metalinguistic explanations. The content of the writing samples and interview responses indicated that reasons for writing are far more definite than reasons for reading.

Implications

The children who participated in this study identified pictures to be of great significance when reading books. This finding leads to several questions. First, do all five year olds look at books in this way? If not, what are the factors that affect this view? Second, does reading to young children guide them to the understanding that recognition of print is as essential in reading a book as when reading a

sign? If and when does this awareness occur? The children who participated in this study did not seem to realize this, although they were read to daily. Third, what features of a book are most salient to prereaders as they listen to a story being read? Is it the storyline, the pictures and their portrayal of storyline, or the print and its relationship to picture and storyline?

The children were able to identify several purposes for writing that reflect their understanding of the uses of language in print. An answer to the question of whether these purposes are analogous or similar to the functions of oral language would assist in the completion of a more comprehensive description of how children perceive literacy. Several points require further investigation in order to ascertain whether this likeness exists. First, what are the specific functions written language serves for prereaders? Second, do the functions they articulate differ from those they actually employ? Third, is there a hierarchy of function? Is there one use that overrides the others or appears most prominent?

The results of this study suggest that beginning reading materials that contain illustrations accompanied by predictable text will make sense to the young reader. Such texts used with an early writing program in which children can experiment with print in a meaningful context provide youngsters with ample opportunities to learn about language in print.

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